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Assad's Brother Maneuvering For Takeover

If any man could be said to have wrecked the Reagan administration's hopes for Lebanon, it would be Hafez Assad, the stubborn Syrian strong man. He outfoxed and outwaited the American peacemakers at every turn until he got what he wanted: Syrian dominance in Beirut.

But Assad may not have long to gloat. U.S. and Israeli intelligence sources agree that his health is so poor he could soon die.

When Assad goes to his dubious reward, Syria could revert to the state of coups and chaos that reigned before Assad took control 13 years ago. Even if there is a peaceful succession—which seems doubtful—the new Syrian leader will probably be too busy consolidating his position in Damascus to pursue Syrian ambitions in Lebanon.

The power struggle has already begun among Assad's would-be heirs. "The vultures are circling," a State Department source told my associate Lucette Lagnado. "People are striking out to position themselves when Assad keels over."

The end appears imminent. Assad

has always been known as a meticulous "detail man"; now he has been forced to delegate some of his duties. He puts in only a few hours a day at his office, and drops entirely from sight for weeks at a time. His grip is clearly not as strong as it used to be.

The greediest, most bloodthirsty vulture circling over the seriously ill president is his brother, Rifaat Assad. As the regime's hatchet man, Rifaat has amassed a sizable private army, which he has recently stationed at strategic locations in Damascus. His rivals have deployed troops outside the capital in a standoff that could collapse when the president dies.

Rifaat's opponents despise him on personal grounds as a corrupt, womanizing cutthroat. But it's his political drawbacks that worry them most. Rifaat, an Alawite Moslem, is hated and feared by the Sunni majority, whom he has butchered by the thousands.

Rifaat's control of Damascus gives him the edge over other claimants, but it's not clear that he could rule Syria even with unified support from his fellow Alawites.

"Ruling Syria requires a delicate balance of forces," one Israeli official noted. "You need a strong linchpin. That was [Hafez] Assad."

Rifaat is considered pro-American, at least by Syrian standards. He owns property in the United States and has children in

school here. In fact, his rivals have spread the rumor that Rifaat is on the CIA's payroll.

The Soviets are undoubtedly aware that Rifaat believes their role in Syria should be more limited. As the Syrian army's providers, the Soviets could exercise critical influence in the post-Assad power struggle.

The Israelis at this point are betting that Rifaat won't be able to stay at the top in Damascus. The Israelis predict—perhaps a bit wishfully—that Syria will deteriorate into the anarchy of old.

U.S. policy experts aren't sure which way things will fall in Syria. But if turmoil does indeed follow Assad's death, it could be a break for Lebanon—and thus, indirectly, for the United States and its chief ally in the region, Israel.